

## Class Notes for the Film *The English Patient*

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### Guys/Folks/People:

These brief notes I have prepared for you on this film should go some way in assisting you to both appreciate and comprehend the film better. It is important that I stress that these notes are not meant to be a substitute for seeing the film. To motivate you to concentrate your minds: test questions on the film *and* these notes will be quite detailed. Do not overlook the footnotes! **Note:** the section titled glossary, below, must be read in conjunction with the main glossary, the *course glossary*, that I have prepared for you (available through the *online materials for course assignments* page).

1. This film is a work of fiction—in this instance composed of flashbacks—but set against a backdrop of true historical events.<sup>1</sup> The basic storyline of the film, as is often the case with many Hollywood films, rests on an *illicit* (and in this case highly tragic) romance between two characters.

Symptomatic of the decadence of Western civilization in its twilight, Western storytellers,



filmmakers, and film audiences never seem to tire of “celebrating” debauchery. Having said this however, I should emphasize that the storyline is quite complex, not least because of its nonlinearity. (From your point of view, this means that you may have to see the film a second time, on your own, to fully understand it. By the way, there is brief nudity in this film; if this bothers you just close your eyes when the scene comes up.) NOTE: the purpose for assigning you this film has nothing to do with this basic plot. Rather, it is the contextual background of the plot that is of key interest (so, don't have a cow!).

2. The geographic places of the story are North Africa, and Italy. A word or two about North Africa. Ever since Europeans arrived in Africa there has been a tendency to cut North Africa off from the rest of the continent, and sadly Africans themselves have been “brainwashed” into accepting this illegitimate bifurcation of the continent. The reason has been and continues to be racism: the

racism of the Europeans who believed that North Africa was too “civilized” to be considered part of Africa, the racism of North Africans who also share this same belief to this day, and the racism of the sub-Saharan Africans as a response to the racism of the other two. In this course, Africa is considered as Africa: a continent bounded by the Mediterranean and the Red Sea to the north and the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans to the south. Question: do *you* view Africa in this way (as this course does)? If not, why not?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Actually the central character is based on a true-life person, but it is not a biographical representation in any way—except for the part dealing with geographic exploration and mapping.

<sup>2</sup> Consider: when people ask me where I am from, originally, and I tell them I am from Africa, nine times out of ten the response is “But you don't look African.” Really, do you know what all Africans look like? Have you been to Africa? Have you travelled through the *entire* African continent?

3. The film is part of one of the dominant themes that we have been/or will be exploring: the one that looks at Africa as an exotic playground or place of refuge—serving as little more than a backdrop for the exploits of Westerners. (In other words, the setting could easily be some other place on the planet without violating the essential integrity of the story in the film.) The subtext of this approach to the cinematic portrayal of Africa is that it is a reflection of the “ideology of whiteness.” However, this film (as in the case of a similar film, *Nowhere in Africa*) brings out another, less commonly explored, aspect of this ideology: it clearly establishes the *contingent* character of whiteness as a racial categorization. That is, like other racial categorizations, “whiteness” is not a stable category: the same person can be “white” or some other color depending upon time and place. Question: who decides to which racial category you belong? You? Or someone else?

4. When the matter is seen from the perspective of Africa, in this particular film the “whiteness” theme is expressed by means of two specific (but typically) unexplored burdens: European colonialism and as if that is not enough, a war in which the Africans had no part to play in terms of its origins but nonetheless are not spared its devastating



consequences. Question: Why is it considered so “natural” that Europeans should have left their part of the world to colonize other parts of the world in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries? Notice also that this point brings up an essential characteristic of almost all films that are set in Africa made by Westerners: race is always either a text or a subtext of the film. Question: What does “subtext” mean? In this film, however, the question of race is expressed differently (it is restricted to how we define whiteness) and subtly but nevertheless devastatingly. Note: it

will be hard for you to figure this out unless you pay special attention to the subtext—reminder, you are not supposed to “enjoy” films screened in this course.

5. O.K. let’s cut to the chase: Am I saying that this is a “racist” film? The short answer is the same one I would give for a number of the other films we have seen/or will see: Yes, and No. Yes, in this sense: that it ignores the African perspective, not necessarily in a calculated way, but in the sense that the filmmakers’ ideology of whiteness prevents them from seeing Africa beyond the narrow confines of “exoticism.” No, because in this film (as in the previous films) there is an attempt at capturing “border-crossings”—something I will explain in a moment—but always within the limited confines of the ideology of “whiteness.”

6. One of the subthemes—albeit a generic one, that is it is not necessarily specific to the African context—is that woven sub-textually throughout the film is what may be referred to as “border-crossings.” There is a three-fold idea behind this concept: first, is that while racial categorizations are based on a bogus understanding of the origins of humanity, the *cultural* basis of these categorizations is not (which is what is really at heart here—consider: When compared to other people on this planet, what makes you a U.S. American? What differentiates you between your relatives in Europe, or Africa, or Asia, or South America, or the Caribbean, or even Canada for that matter? Your skin color? Or your culture?). Second, that different human cultures are a natural outgrowth of the needs of adaptation to the diversity of planetary ecosystems. Third, that the “boundaries” between different cultures are fluid zones that permit *desirable* back and forth “crossings” as one shares



one's own culture and partakes of that of others (accomplished either consciously or unconsciously by means of trade, war, conquest, colonization, travel, news, and so on).<sup>3</sup>

7. Looking at it purely from the perspective of filmmaking, to say that this is indeed a well-crafted film would be an understatement. In part, this has to do with the fact that it is based on an equally well-crafted screenplay of a well-written novel, and in part because the filmmakers went to extraordinary lengths to render the film a cinematic work of art (everything to this end works: the screenplay, the acting, the cinematography, the editing, the film score, the production design, the sound design, costumery, and so on).<sup>4</sup> This film can be categorized as an *intelligent* film (in contrast to intellectually *soporific* or idiotic films—the hallmark of such films is that they can be best described by adjectives such as asinine, banal, degenerate, mediocre, decadent, and so on). Intelligent films as those that are, at once, highly entertaining, and yet powerfully thought-provoking, emotionally challenging, and intellectually enriching. Most importantly, they fulfill the mandate of true art: via the medium of the aesthetic experience to comment upon and/or question the status quo—at whatever level it may be (global, regional, national, local, etc.) and from whatever perspective (the family, society, polity, economy, the environment, etc., etc.) To explain this point in another way: the difference between an intelligent film and non-intelligent film, at the simplest



level, is that the intelligent film makes demands on the intelligence of the viewer. This difference emerges most clearly when one makes the distinction between art and entertainment. Art makes one look at the world differently, while entertainment throws back what one already knows, but in an oversimplified manner. Youngblood (1979:754) captures this distinction in relation to cinema succinctly: "By perpetuating a destructive habit of unthinking response to formulas, by forcing us to rely ever more frequently on memory, the commercial entertainer encourages an unthinking response to daily life, inhibiting self-awareness.... He[er/she] offers nothing we haven't already conceived, nothing we don't already expect. Art explains; entertainment exploits. Art is freedom from the conditions of memory; entertainment is conditional on a present that is conditioned by the past. Entertainment gives us what we want; art gives us what we don't know what we want. To confront a work of art is to confront one self—but aspects of oneself previously unrecognized."<sup>5</sup> Intelligent films, then, are also works of art.<sup>6</sup> Question: how is

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<sup>3</sup> Thought experiment: imagine that your cuisine was deprived of tomatoes, potatoes, chocolate, coffee, rice, and peppers—to list just a few food items—what would it be like? All these items are a gift from other cultures. One can apply the same reasoning, for instance, to music: without African music there would be no jazz, and without jazz there would be no rock (or even hip-hop). Or consider: Where would science be today if we relied on *Roman* numerals instead of *Arabic* numerals (yes, Arabic numerals are *not* a Western invention). Without border-crossings there can be no civilizations, and without border-crossings the quality of our lives would be greatly diminished. A good example of a border-crossing is shown in the film *Never Cry Wolf*—it starts when the protagonist collapses in the snow at the beginning of the film.

<sup>4</sup> The fact that the novel's author also worked closely with the filmmakers also probably helped to improve the quality of the screenplay. Note that this is not common in the film industry. Once filmmakers have bought the film rights to a book the author has absolutely no say in how and when the film will be made.

<sup>5</sup> Youngblood, Gene. "Art, Entertainment, Entropy." In *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, edited by Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, pp. 754-760. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1979.

<sup>6</sup> You will probably not be surprised to learn that the Hollywood moguls do not like to finance intelligent films these days—because you can't be sure that the masses will take to the films and make them the money. This film was only completed, eventually, because of the financing provided by Miramax when it was still an independent film distributor. The Hollywood studios, specifically 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, took a pass on the film because the producers would not budge on casting. The studio wanted lead actors (e.g. Demi Moore, Danny De Vito) they thought would be sure-fire box office draws. Incidentally, one of the founders of Miramax is a U.B. graduate; read article on him [here](#). He is also the same person who, tragically, helped to kick

it possible for a college student at a research university (like yourself) to specialize in viewing the same type of films that someone without even a high school diploma enjoys? What does it say about your *intellectual* maturity?

8. This film falls into that category generally known as “epics.” An epic film is one that marries great production values with a storyline that unfolds on a grand scale exploring life’s enduring but unanswerable questions. The trade mark of such films is, more often than not, a screenplay based on a multi-layered well-known novel with an intense personal story that is set in the context of widely sweeping true historical events. At the same time, epics may be considered as “classics”—meaning that they will stand the test of time in terms of attracting audiences across the generations.<sup>7</sup>



## Glossary

**Art:** see the course glossary (part of online readings) I have prepared for you.

**Exoticism:** see the course glossary (part of online readings) I have prepared for you.

**Imperialism:** see the course glossary (part of online readings) I have prepared for you.

**Race/Racism:** see the course glossary (part of online readings) I have prepared for you.

**Whiteness:** see the course glossary (part of online readings) I have prepared for you.

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start the “Me-Too” Movement. So, read another article on him [here](#). (In other words, one can say that the film does have some connection with Buffalo, at least from the perspective of production. In terms of the screenplay itself there is some connection there too, albeit very tangential: in the opening scenes of the film they mention a place in Western Ontario not too far from here.) Here is something telling: In terms of box office sales, the film never made it to the list of top 5 weekend opening films at the time of its release, but it has become among the highest grossing films since then. Moreover, the film was nominated for twelve academy awards; it won nine, including Best Picture. (The film cost about 35 million dollars—by Hollywood standards a low-budget film for an epic—and it grossed about a 100 million dollars. Interestingly, the film producer sued Walt Disney in 2006, by which time it had bought Miramax, for not sharing the film’s profits.)

<sup>7</sup> Other examples of epics that quickly come to mind include: *Braveheart*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Doctor Zhivago*, *Gandhi*, *Glory*, *Gone with the Wind*, *War and Peace*, *The House of the Spirits*, *The Last Emperor*, *The Quiet American*, *Reds*, *Titanic*, *To Live (Huozhe)*, and so on.